

June 24, 1964

Dear Professor Tiselius:

This letter could be only a clumsy substitute for the personal interchange I would heartily prefer as a medium for some of the following thoughts.

To deal with the least important matter first. Some while ago I was quite distressed at a flurry of publicity that was given to a scientific-venture company with which I had a tenuous (and by my subsequent response, transient) connection. Especially disturbing was the obvious exploitation of the Nobel Prize, which I felt was in very poor taste, and I want to assure you I would in no way condone. The matter is a triviality, and to attract public attention further by any public statement would only aggravate it. However, it is some relief to me at least to be able to offer my private apologies to the Nobel Foundation and yourself. Such incidents must be a commonplace; I am sure you realize how difficult it is to restrain publicists from overreaching the bounds of good taste.

I am sure that such incidents must keep alive the question in both our minds as to the net balance of the constructive values of Mr. Nobel's prizes in today's world. The negative aspects you must know better than most, and I will not belabor what you already know. I should confide to you in all sincerity that I faced a trial of conscience in 1958, whether to accept the prize: the issues included serious doubts as to the merits, the negative prospects of the impact of the prize on the continuity of my scientific work, and the general principle of the contra-scientific spirit of individual recognition. But I found I did not have the courage to refuse -- perhaps largely on account of the temptation to accept the accolades, partly because of my reluctance to make so ungracious a rebuff to my friends and colleagues in the scientific community who would not take so complex a view of such an award, and especially to Tatum and Beadle, whom I do deeply admire and respect; finally it was obvious that a declination could only lead to a far deeper measure of the notoriety that was the most odious encumbrance of the awards.

Time has partly justified, partly tempered these considerations. It would perhaps be arrogant for me to overjudge the committee's conclusions. If I am certain that several of my colleagues have made far more brilliant contributions I realize how difficult it is to focus on a consensus; and I am sure the committee has made and will continue to make equally dubious choices. And whether a laureate builds well or badly after his prize is a challenge to his own character and intellect that he should face with courage and responsibility, not cowardly evasion or even false modesty.

Having kept dormant the incentive for this letter for some while, I was reminded of it by a notice of the First Athens Conference in which your name and the title of your discussion of 'balanced progress in science' figured. It would please me to exchange views on this point, which has also interested me very much; from what I already know of your position I believe I would support it strongly.

This has led to some reflection of the positive aspects of the awards: the most obstinate objectivist in science cannot avoid some reflection on his social responsibilities under the multifarious impacts of a Nobel award; and its notoriety carries some obligation as well as opportunity for responsible public statement. I am disturbed, however, by the extent to which "eminent scientists" are sometimes captivated by their political wisdom in spheres where they have little special qualification, while they still neglect some of the most fundamental issues of the bearing of science itself on the direction of the human experience. I am also disturbed at what is partly a reaction to this, how disreputable broader thinking about science is to some of our most distinguished minds.

Would it not be within Nobel's mandate to consider some more explicit means of encouraging more critical attention to scientific humanics? I realize the weight of tradition, and the hazards of more tangible political involvements. You might argue that the awards themselves are a sufficient function, and that this purpose still evolves by indirection out of the confusion and pomp which are only the superficial manifestations of the awards. My main counter-argument might be Nobel's own idealistic motives, and the question whether his testament is adequately fulfilled by the contemporary system.

Unfortunately, I have little to offer in tangible suggestions; the definition of a program itself might be the most constructive effort for the Foundation to sponsor. I do have one meager thought, that the Foundation itself sponsor a journal for critical discussion in this field, and especially that it undertake to collect for annual re-publication some of the outstanding essays that have appeared scattered through the world's literature. The thought reinforces itself when I consider the focal power this lens would have if you would lend your own impetus to it.

With cordial regards,

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